

Uniform Statistical Reporting System

1991 Client Follow-up Study II



Data Collection Methods

Statewide Office of Family Court Services
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Administrative Office of the Courts

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Uniform Statistical Reporting System Acknowledgments

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DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The 1991 Client Follow-up Study II is the third data collection in a longitudinal study of parents who used court-based child custody mediation to attempt to work out child custody and visitation plans. The project is part of a program of research, the Uniform Statistical Reporting System, that fulfills the Statewide Office of Family Court Services' mandate to provide uniform statewide statistics that advise family law policy.¹ The program's mission is to provide rigorous statistics on issues facing policy makers, judges, attorneys, court personnel, researchers, special interest groups, and parents who use the family courts.

The Statewide Office employs a collaborative model in all of its research, identifying research questions in consultation with policy leaders and family court service providers and users across the state. Primary responsibility for the scientific merit, administration, and analysis of the findings rests with the Statewide Office.

The 1991 Client Baseline Study² (also referred to as the 1991 Snapshot Study) was the first large-scale statewide data collection from a representative cross-section of parents who used family court services. That study provided reliable statistics about family court service users throughout California and, for those participating in child-custody mediation, their experiences in court at that time. However, the baseline study could not address questions about longer-term outcomes for families.

Two follow-up studies were designed to re-interview parents periodically some years after the mediation session covered in the 1991 Client Baseline Study. By the end of the 1991 mediation session, some parents had agreed on a parenting plan for their children, some would continue mediating, and some would proceed to a court hearing for a decision on custody and visitation. The first follow-up study³ (1991 Client Follow-up Study I) of the 1991 cohort was planned to shed light on what happened next: How those parents ultimately formed their parenting plans; how they deviated from those plans; their

¹Under Family Code sections 1850-52, the California Statewide Office of Family Court Services is mandated to (1) assist counties in implementing mediation and conciliation proceedings; (2) administer a program of grants for research, study, and demonstration projects in the area of family law; (3) administer a program for the training of court personnel involved in family law proceedings; (4) establish and implement a uniform statistical reporting, and (5) conduct research on the effectiveness of current family law for the purpose of shaping future public policy.

²A full description of the content, design, and methodology of the study can be found in *The 1991 California Family Court Services Snapshot Study: Data Collection Methods* (1994), Statewide Office of Family Court Services, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco. For an overview of the results of the study, see *Report 1: Families, Cases, and Client Feedback* (1992), Statewide Office of Family Court Services, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco.

³A full description of the content, design, and methodology of the study can be found in *The 1993 California Statewide Follow-up Study: Data Collection Methods* (1994), Statewide Office of Family Court Services, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco.

returns to family court; their relationships with their children; how the parenting plans worked for the children; the parents' retrospective evaluation of their experience in family court. The second follow-up study (1991 Client Follow-up Study II) examined five-year outcomes for the children and attempted to identify their sources of risk and resilience.

Study Design and Content

The 1991 Baseline Study attempted to collect data about every session held in family court services' offices throughout the state during a specified time period. Most of the family court services' sessions (1,388 out of 1,699) were child-custody and visitation mediation sessions; the remainder were evaluations for child custody or visitation, pre-marital counseling, marriage counseling, domestic violence counseling, step-parent adoptions, and guardianships. Only mediation clients were re-interviewed in the follow-up studies.

The 1991 Client Baseline Study used self-administered questionnaires, which the clients filled out immediately before and after their mediation sessions in the family court services' offices. Both follow-up studies combined two methods: a mail survey and a telephone survey of those not located or not responding to the mail survey.

The data collection for 1991 Client Follow-up Study II was conducted by the Institute for Social and Behavioral Studies of California State University at San Marcos. Mailing procedures generally accepted in the survey research community⁴ were used in conducting the three-wave mail survey. The first mailing consisted of a personalized letter, a copy of the questionnaire, and a postage-paid, self-addressed envelope. One week later a reminder postcard was sent. Another personalized letter, questionnaire, and return envelope was sent two weeks later as the third and final wave.

Envelopes returned with a forwarding address were re-mailed. Cases with envelopes returned as undeliverable and without a forwarding address were immediately transferred to a telephone search system.

Once a respondent was reached by telephone, he or she was interviewed using a Computer Assisted Telephone Instrument (CATI). The mail questionnaire was adapted for CATI, making every attempt to keep the wording identical and presentation of the questions to the respondent as similar as possible. The telephone interviewers were experienced and trained to follow the questionnaire exactly.

The Follow-up Study II questionnaire repeated selected items from the instruments used on the earlier studies and added new questions about the children. Replicated items provided updates on parenting plans, children's time distribution, parents' current economic situations, and their co-parenting experiences. The new questions gathered information about the children's history of residential and school changes, experiences in

⁴See Dillman, Don A., *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method* (1978) Wiley, New York.

school, behavioral and social characteristics, and other aspects of their past and current lives. Chart 1, below, summarizes the questionnaire's content.

CHART 1
1991 Client Follow-up Study II
Questionnaire Content

Demographic profile of parents and children
Current custody disposition
Current parenting arrangements
Child's residential and school history
Child's special needs
Child's academic, behavioral, and social development
Parents' assessment of child's temperament
Relationships between child and parents
Co-parenting issues

Coverage and Representativeness

The 1991 Client Follow-up Studies I and II provide the only longitudinal statewide data about families who have used court-based child custody mediation. Until the 1991 Client Baseline Study, the only studies of court-based mediation in California had been with convenience samples, regional populations, or confined to individual superior courts. Similarly, the few longitudinal studies conducted on families who had used court-based child custody mediation were not statewide studies. Those kinds of studies provided a valuable exploration of the issues, but were too limited in scope to provide evaluative data, or data on the prevailing experience of parents using family court services across the state.

Chart 2 presents the numbers and response rates for the 1991 Client Baseline Study and 1991 Client Follow-up Studies I and II. The first column of Chart 2 indicates that during the 1991 two-week Baseline Study period 1,697 court-based child custody mediation sessions took place. Information was collected about 82 percent of those sessions (1,388). The covered sessions involved 2,708 parents; 84 percent of those (2,274) consented to future contact.

CHART 2
1991 Client Baseline Study, 1991 Client Follow-up Studies I and II

1991 Client Baseline Study		1991 Client Follow-up Study I		1991 Client Follow-up Study II	
Total Mediation Sessions Conducted During Study Period	1,697	Parents located for Follow-up I	1,944	Parents located for Follow-up II	1053
Mediation Sessions Included in Study (session represents family)	1,388	(Percent of consenting parents)	85%	(Percent of parents interviewed in Follow-up I)	69%
(Percent of total mediation sessions included in study)	82 %	Parents located and eligible for Follow-up I--not deceased or reconciled	1,888	Parents located and eligible for Follow-up II--not deceased, reconciled, or gave up parental rights	1,023
Parents In Mediation Sessions Included in Snapshot Study⁵	2,708	(Percent of located parents)	97%	(Percent of located eligible parents)	97%
Parents Consenting to Recontact	2,274	Number located and eligible who refused	175	Number located and eligible who refused	116
(Percent of parents in mediation sessions included in Snapshot Study)	84%	(Percent of located eligible parents)	9%	(Percent of located eligible parents)	11%
		Number located eligible but not interviewed for other reasons	181	Number located eligible but not interviewed for other reasons	40
		(Percent of located eligible parents)	10%	(Percent of located eligible parents)	4%
		Parents Interviewed in Follow-up I	1,532	Parents Interviewed in Follow-up II	867
		(Percent of located eligible parents)	81%	(Percent of located eligible parents)	85%
		Mail Questionnaire	931	Mail Questionnaire	364
		Telephone Interview	601	Telephone Interview	503
		Number of Families Represented in Follow-up I	1,069	Number of Families Represented in Follow-up II	698
		(Percent of Families from Snapshot Study)	77%	(Percent of Families from Snapshot Study)	50%

⁵Based on Counselor's report of who was in the office for the session, 1991 Counselor Information questionnaire.

The second column of Chart 2 presents the results of 1991 Client Follow-up Study I. Eighty-five percent (1,944) of the consenting parents were located for that follow-up study and 97 percent of those located (1,888) were eligible. (Respondents became ineligible if, at the time of the follow-up, they had reconciled with the other parent, lost parental rights, or if their children included in the 1991 study were all over seventeen.) Eighty-one percent (1,532) of the located and eligible parents agreed to be interviewed. The Baseline Study collected information about 1,388 separate families; 77 percent of those families (1,069) were represented in the first follow-up study.

The results of 1991 Client Follow-up Study II are shown in the third column of Chart 2. For this five-year follow-up only 69 percent (1,053) of the parents interviewed in Follow-up Study I were located and 97 percent of those located (1,023) were eligible. Eighty-five percent (867) of the located and eligible parents were interviewed again. Of the 1,388 families included in the Baseline Study, 50 percent (698) were represented in the second follow-up study.

Chart 2 is a summary of the results of the attempts to collect data over time from a population first captured in June 1991. It shows that the Baseline Study succeeded in including a large enough proportion of all mediation sessions that took place during the two-week Baseline Study period (82 percent) to provide a representative sample of all sessions. Longitudinal studies are difficult; recontacting any population after a gap of two to five years is a challenge. A California population of just divorced or separated parents is a particularly mobile group. The chart indicates that a high percentage of located and eligible parents were interviewed in the follow-up studies (81 percent in Follow-up Study I and 85 percent in Follow-up Study II). Most of the population loss was in relocation.

The chart shows that the number of parents who participated in the mediation sessions included in the 1991 Client Baseline Study was 2,708. Not all of those parents filled out questionnaires (but some data about the families and the mediation sessions were included in the study) and only 84 percent (2,274) consented to being recontacted. The most stringent methodological standard would consider that number of parents (2,708) as the base number against which the follow-up studies are measured. Following that stringent standard, 57 percent of those parents were interviewed in Follow-up Study I and 32 percent in Follow-up Study II. The coverage is somewhat better when families rather than individuals are considered. Of the 1,388 families represented in the 1991 Client Baseline Study, 77 percent were represented in Follow-up Study I and 50 percent in Follow-up Study II.

Attrition

The major concern to be considered in interpreting the follow-up studies' results, is the sample attrition, i.e., the number of respondents lost between the baseline and follow-up studies, and the bias that loss introduces. We know that the baseline study sample was an accurate representation of the population participating in court-based child-custody mediation. What, if any, are the differences between the 1991 Baseline Study sample and

the parts of the sample reinterviewed in Follow-up Study I and II? Do those differences lead to differences in the results of the studies?

After the 1991 Client Baseline Study, demographic characteristics and client satisfaction indicators for those parents who consented to recontact were compared to those for parents who did not consent. No differences were found between those groups. This would indicate no systematic bias in the population of parents available for attempted follow-up. After each follow-up study, a comparison was made between the respondents in the follow-up study sample and the original 1991 sample, using 1991 Baseline Study data to look for potential areas of bias.

A parent's reported satisfaction with mediation apparently had no impact on whether or not the parent participated in either of the follow-up studies. The responses to the series of questions in the exit form used in the 1991 Client Baseline Study asking for an evaluation of the mediator, the mediation session, and the process, were extremely positive. In both Follow-up Study I and Follow-up Study II, the subsets of the original 1991 respondents included in the follow-up studies had the same high levels of satisfaction as the baseline study respondents as a whole.

Some differences in demographic and other significant variables were found among the three samples. Chart 3 compares all baseline study respondents with the subsets of respondents included in each of the follow-up studies. Please note that the indicators are all responses to the 1991 Baseline Study questionnaires.

Looking at the family level, those families where neither parent was represented by an attorney were less likely to participate in the Follow-up Studies. In the 1991 Baseline Study sample as a whole, in 24 percent of the families neither parent was represented by an attorney. In the Follow-up Study I panel, this was true of 22 percent of the families and in the Follow-up Study II panel, only 19 percent of the families fell into that category.

Families who had returned to court at the time of the 1991 Baseline Study for a modification of an existing parenting plan were more likely to participate in the follow-ups. That percentage is 48 percent of the Baseline Sample, 51 percent of the first follow-up panel, and 53 percent of the second follow-up panel. The proportion of families in the panel making no allegations or counter-allegations increases from 47 percent in the original sample, to 48 percent in the first follow-up, to 53 percent in the second follow-up sample. Similarly the percentage of those families with two or more allegations or counter-allegations, decreases from 30 percent of the original sample's families, to 29 percent of the first follow-up families, and 26 percent of the second follow-up families. The percentage of families with a Child Protective Service Investigation reported by either parent is basically the same across the three time periods (23, 23, and 22 percent respectively).

Examining individual characteristics, the panel members included in the follow-up studies are older, better educated, employed, higher income, and more likely to be white.

The percentage of parents who were aged 35-49 in 1991 increased from 45 percent of the original sample, to 47 percent of the first follow-up sample, to 50 percent of the second follow-up sample. The proportion who were at least college graduates similarly increased across the three panels from 20 percent, to 23 percent to 26 percent. Considering those who ended formal education after High School graduation, that proportion decreased slightly between the original sample and the first follow-up (from 28 percent to 27 percent), but stayed at 27 percent in the second follow-up.

CHART 3
Comparison of Respondents:
1991 Client Baseline Study, 1991 Client Follow-up Study I,
and 1991 Client Follow-up Study II

	1991 Client Baseline Study	1991 Client Follow-up Study I	1991 Client Follow-up Study II
VARIABLE			
Family Characteristics			
Represented by an Attorney: Neither parent	24%	22%	19%
In Family Court for Modification of parenting plan	48	51	53
Allegations made: None	47	48	53
One	23	23	22
Two or more	30	29	26
Child Protective Service Investigation: Reported by either parent	23	23	22
Individual characteristics			
Age: 35-49 in 1991	45	47	50
Education: High School Graduate	28	27	27
At least College Graduate	20	23	26
AFDC recipient	11	11	9
Employed	72	76	79
Below the poverty line	15	15	14
Average Monthly Income	\$1,646	\$1,663	\$1,710
Ethnicity: White	64	67	70
Never married to child's other parent	16	15	14
Never had a Domestic Violence Temporary Restraining Order	41	44	47
Relationship to children: Mother	51	54	56
Reported children have special needs	31	34	34

Other indicators of socio-economic status repeat this general pattern. Each follow-up panel consists of a slightly more advantaged subset of the original 1991 sample. Further,

the follow-up study participants were less likely to never have been married to the other parent (the proportion varying from 16 to 15 to 14 percent) and more likely to report that they never had a Domestic Violence Temporary Restraining Order (41 percent increasing to 44 percent increasing to 47 percent). Mothers are more likely to have continued to participate in the studies; (they constituted 51 percent of the original sample, and 56 percent of the second follow-up sample), as are those parents who report that their children have special needs.

The differences among the three samples are relatively few and small. There are no differences on client reports of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with mediation. However, the differences that are shown in Chart 3 should be factored in when interpreting the data and drawing conclusions.

Conclusion

By the time of the second follow-up study, five years after the initial data collection, the sample has suffered considerable attrition. It is clear that those of lower socio-economic status and those reporting domestic violence and other kinds of problems are the part of the original sample most likely to have been missed in the follow-up studies. On the other hand, as Chart 3 documents, the subsets of the panel who participated in 1991 Client Follow-up Study I and 1991 Client Follow-up Study II are very similar to the original 1991 Client Baseline Study sample. Despite the numbers lost in each follow-up, the group of respondents who continued to participate in the studies basically replicate the original sample.

The 1991 Client Baseline Study met the goals of the Statewide Office's Uniform Statistical Reporting System to provide useful and valid information from a representative cross-section of parents who used family court services. The information in this report indicates that the 1991 Client Follow-up Study II is a valid longitudinal study which continues to meet those goals. Follow-up Study II data provide an unprecedented opportunity to examine the risk and resilience factors experienced by children in a five-year period after their parents mediated in family court, and how they impact on the children's current status.